

The Great Hassanbad Handicap

By
MICHAEL WHITE

BECAUSE Hassanbad lay tucked away on the blazing rock waste of the British side of the Baluchistan border, was that any reason why nothing should ever happen there to make people look decently wise when you were introduced in other parts as the Deputy Commissioner, Station Doctor, or Civil Engineer of Hassanbad? True, there was the local Mad Mullah, who had stirred up things a bit by rampaging across the border; but a price of five thousand rupees set on his capture had driven him apparently to a retreat among the hills.

Consequently Hassanbad, or the white men's small quarter of it, had dropped back into wondering what could be done to put Hassanbad on the map. It impressed the majority as rather a good idea when someone suggested inaugurating a Hassanbad Handicap race meeting. With lenient rules of entry and a purse of two thousand rupees for the principal event, it was thought that people even as far off as Bombay might at least hear of Hassanbad.

The plan was especially supported by one Donlin, but for reasons otherwise than pure Hassanbad glory. Donlin was an American who had wandered up to Hassanbad on the chance of survey work across the border. When waiting for the government to vote supplies he fell in love with the Deputy Commissioner's most attractive daughter. Considering that Vivian Lestrangle had been up to Simla and could number among her captives there one old General, two young aides-de-camp, and a tea planter fat in both person and pocketbook, it was seemingly unaccountable that she should take up with Donlin, who had little more than half a dozen rupees to jingle together. How the two managed to keep the affair a secret in a place like Hassanbad, where your khitmutgar could pretty accurately inform you what your neighbor kept in his padlocked despatch box, was another mystery hard to comprehend. But it is said that sometimes—very rarely—the natives love a Sahib. Then a burglar's jimmy would not pry out of them anything prejudicial to his interests.

QUITE openly, without a shred of reserve, Donlin calmly stated at the club that he meant to win the Handicap, simply because he needed the two thousand rupees to help along a private matter. Such brazen assurance was received as a mighty good joke.

"I say, listen, you fellows!" grinned Peyton of the police. "Donlin says he's going to win the Handicap. Ever see him on a horse?"

A shout of laughter went up amid the tinkle of ice in long glasses.

"Laugh all you want now," Donlin merely said. "My turn will come later."

"By Jove!" put in a young subaltern on detachment duty at Hassanbad. "I believe Donlin is actually serious. Picked out your nag yet, old chap?"

"No, I haven't," replied Donlin quietly.

"Why not borrow an elephant? The Handicap is free to all comers."

At this sally the laugh went round again; while the subaltern winked facetiously at Bradley, the Station Doctor, elected chief steward of the course.

"How about entering Donlin on an elephant?" he questioned of Bradley.

"Well—er—I presume in Donlin's particular case," spoke Bradley with an assumed judicial manner, "we should have to enter him if he rode on the course on top of a water buffalo."

Donlin's hand came down on a table with a thump that halted further fun at his expense. "Is that just foolishness or a fair and square challenge?" he demanded of Bradley.

"My dear fellow, I trust I am—an never foolish," Bradley gravely protested. "I always say what I mean, don't you know."

"I'll make them—I'll make them swallow their own joke—see if I don't!" he said to himself. It's Donlin speaking,—Donlin the young American who had dared to fall in love with the Deputy Commissioner's most attractive daughter.



"While the camels squealed, bit, and strove to kick each other in their rage, Donlin and Ya Hak fought in their own fashion."

"Done, then!" cried Donlin. "I'll take you all up on that proposition. Haven't entirely decided what kind of beast I'll ride; but if I turn up on a coolie-eating muggar, you'll have to enter it. Don't pretend you have forgotten."

HE turned to grin over his shoulder, and strode out of the club in a silence of amused wonder. Outside he stopped to pull his pith helmet down over his eyes. The grin on his face broadened.

"I'll make them—I'll make them swallow their own joke—see if I don't!" he said with a snap of determination to himself.

He thought a few minutes, pulled himself together as if his mind had settled on a definite purpose, and went off with long strides toward the native quarter. At last he came to a gate set in a high wall of whitewashed, sun-baked brick. At one side squatted an old Afghan solemnly pulling at a water pipe. In lifting his head in response to Donlin's greeting the Afghan disclosed a bearded, severely cut visage with black, piercing eyes.

"Salaam, Haji Mohammed Khan."

"Salaam, Donlin Sahib. Of what service can I be to your Honor?"

"Quite a bit. I want you to let me look over that Bedou camel you talked of the other night."

Mohammed Khan withdrew the mouth-piece of his pipe and reflectively touched his beard. "A camel beyond price!" he presently exclaimed. "A beast fit to bear the Sacred Carpet!"

"Doubtless," assented Donlin. "That is why I wish to speak correctly of her unexcelled points."

"Come, then," said the old Afghan camel trader, rising slowly. "Did you not pick up my little son Afzal Khan from under the feet of another Sahib's horse? Between us there is that henceforth which does not require your Honor's command given twice."

Mohammed Khan led Donlin into a court used chiefly as a stable. In it several camels had folded up their ungainly forms on the pavement; but one stood apart as if disdaining the company of the others. It was to this beast that Mohammed Khan drew Donlin's attention. He stretched out his hands toward it in the manner of exhibiting a treasure.

"Lo! observe this camel, Fatima, a true Bedou of the Hajaz, seldom seen in this

country! I bought her from the Arab sheik who contracts for the mails between Mecca and Jiddah. The sheik swore by all the Holy Places that Fatima had swept over the forty miles of mail road in less than three hours. This I now believe since I have tried her speed. She is still but a four-year-old. Notice the lightness of her build, the breadth of her chest, and the spread of her feet. See too the arch of her neck, and the upward carriage of her head."

"Yes," nodded Donlin; "but how would she run matched against a fast horse?"

"On loose stone or sandy soil, and given some start, an Arab of the Nejd would hardly catch up with her. For that has Allah given her the wide spread of feet."

"Exactly," mused Donlin. "Then any ground hereabout ought to be rough or heavy enough to suit her in all conscience. I presume," he turned to Mohammed Khan, "you expect to get a big price for your Fatima?"

"From a Prince, like the Maharaja of Bikanir, who has many fine camels but not one of the Bedou breed, what would be ten thousand rupees?"

"Well, I can't compete with the Maharaja of Bikanir to own that camel outright; but for one day, Mohammed Khan, I would like to hire your Bedou. How much would you take?"

"For which day, Donlin Sahib?"

"That of the Hassanbad Handicap. You have heard of the race?"

"Yes. But to match Fatima against the horses of the other Sahibs? I do not yet understand."

Donlin told how the Hassanbad Club, which was practically the Hassanbad race committee, had laughed at his intention to win, and challenged him to run on any old animal from an elephant to a water buffalo.

"Inshallah!" The old Afghan's eyes lit up with a humorous twinkle. "Then you did well to come to me, O Donlin Sahib. In truth they shall eat their jest and their horses be put to shame by a camel of the Bedou tribe! Say no more on the matter. That day shall be a gift from my little son. Besides, please Allah, if Fatima should win, the Maharaja of Bikanir would doubtless add at least another thousand rupees for a camel that has beaten all the horses of the Sahibs."

"All right," said Donlin. "Now when can I take my first shake-off lesson?"

"I will have Fatima in the nullah on the other side of the fort hill at three hours after sunset tonight," offered Mohammed Khan.


"I'll be there," agreed Donlin.

FOR two weeks following Donlin's absence from the club was noted with varied comment. About every other morning a messenger turned up at Bradley's office with a note from Donlin calling for a bottle of embrocation. What the deuce Donlin wanted with so much embrocation Bradley couldn't imagine. Neither could he draw out from the messenger where Donlin had hidden himself.

Also meantime through the native bazaar ran a strange rumor. A camel-riding jin—it could be no other than a mid-world spirit—had been seen in the nullah after nightfall performing the most astonishing leaps and bounds. This grew with repetition until it was vowed that the jin hopped from the camel's back right up to the mud fort walls atop the rock—an omen held to forecast another visitation of the Mad Mullah.

At last came the day when Hassanbad was to rise from obscurity and take a place among other stations of note. It was remarked with a touch of pride that every bungalow was filled with guests. A fair entry of horses had been made; but considering the difficulty of reaching Hassanbad and the wish to make the Handicap a popular future event the list was to

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This tells of the finish of The Great Hassanbad Handicap

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remain open until close to the start. There were still a few likely men at a distance to be heard from, who might turn up at the last moment.

As to the course, the broken lay of the country compelled the abandonment of two selections, with a final choice of the nullah side over which Donlin had been practising. It swept round the fort's rock base, and then ran in a fairly straight line to the winning posts within a few hundred yards of the Baluchistan border. At both ends tents were set up with a brave display of bunting.

Two minor events were run off successfully; then the first bell rang for the great Hassanbad Handicap. Its jangling note vibrated with the sound of a disturbance at the entrance to the weighing-in paddock. A Sahib leading a lean camel was trying to force his way in against the protests of the native attendants.

BY Jove!" cried Bradley. "If Donlin hasn't turned up with a confounded camel! What the dickens does he mean by it?"

"Mean by it!" called back Donlin, thrusting a passage to where the judges stood looking suddenly mystified. "He means to enter Fatima, a thoroughbred four-year-old, for the Hassanbad Handicap."

"But, my dear fellow," Bradley screwed his monocle into the socket of his right eye, "a camel, you know—a bally camel isn't a horse."

"You don't tell me!" cheerfully responded Donlin. "Well, that is news! Anyway, I'm going to ride Fatima on your challenge. Oh, no, you haven't forgotten. You needn't try and put up any kind of bluff like that on me. I call Brown and Peyton and Grimshaw there to witness your flat agreement made at the club."

"But—but that was a joke," protested Bradley with a bewildered expression.

"Was it?" returned Donlin innocently. "Then why in thunder didn't you label it as such? How am I to know when you are getting off jokes? Anyway, as I took you at your word, I gave you a chance to back out,—here I am to hold you to your promise of entering me on the back of anything from an elephant to a water buffalo. Guess a camel comes within those limits."

Bradley turned for help to the judges. One of them tackled the job of trying to head off Donlin.

"Honestly," he began, "you must see the—er—impropriety of running a camel in a horse race. Positively it would take that old omnibus you have there an hour to get over the course. It would make the thing a public jest, and—ah—look so jolly queer."

"That's pretty much what I thought at the club," replied Donlin. "But since Bradley would have it that way it's not my fault. I'm merely carrying out his plan. Say, isn't it about time to weigh me in?" he added. "I see the others are going to the post."

"Weigh you in!" gasped Bradley. "How on earth are we to weigh in a man on a snail-crawling camel!"

"Oh," suggested Donlin, who saw that the Bedou breed was fortunately unknown to those present, "call back the others and just pile on a few tons of lead. I don't care how much they have to carry."

Bradley and the judges talked again together, letting escape them such expressions as "Most unfortunate joke!"—"Awfully awkward!"—"Taken in earnest, by Jove!"—"Don't see what is to be done."

Presently the second bell rang, and Donlin climbed on the back of his camel. "Well, I'm off to the starting post, Boys," and he hauled the camel's head round in that direction.

"No! No! No!" hastily put in Brad-

ley. "It simply won't do at all. That camel would throw the horses into utter confusion. Some of them would bolt, and we'd never get them properly started. Here, Grimshaw," he hailed one of his aides, "take Donlin and his precious camel out a half-mile to the bend around the rock. We'll give him that much distance handicap, since he's made up his mind to hold me to a foolish promise. No one will see him there, and he can stick in the sand all day if it suits him."

AS he passed out of the inclosure Vivian Lestrangle trotted up beside him on her pony. "Oh, Dick!" she looked worried. "You have gone and done for yourself. Everyone says you are trying to spoil the Hassanbad Handicap with some joke about a camel. Father's awfully angry. After this you'll never, never, never be able to get anything to do here!"

He leaned down with a smile, resting a hand upon her shoulder. "Merely turning the other fellow's jest into a pretty sure outcome," he spoke in a tone of confidence. "I guess this will be the first time a camel ever won a horse race."

Vivian cast upward a dubious look. "Faet," he nodded. "They don't know a thing about camels here. I've got hold of a jim dandy Bedou racer."

"A Bedou racer!"

"Sure! Can go like the wind. You just watch her. And half a mile distance on this ground—ye gods!" he grinned, "that's the real part of the joke. If this doesn't make Hassanbad famous—well, the ancient rock pile had better give up trying to get into the limelight. Come along, and give me word when the others get away."

They chatted hopeful confidences together until the place given Donlin was reached. Then he stationed her on a rise outside the course to signal him when the Handicap started. He hove Fatima into position, and rather impatiently waited. Presently Vivian waved her handkerchief.

"They're off, Dick," she cried, "with Wildeat and Nawab in the lead!"

DONLIN leaned forward and hurriedly repeated some Arabic words instructed by Mohammed Khan. He understood that they signified his terse native "Gid-dap!" only expressed in terms of gross flattery. The camel lifted her head to swing her neck from side to side, but did not seem in a hurry to respond to whatever the Arabic words meant.

"For Heaven's sake get a move on!" urged Donlin. "You got busy quicker than this when it didn't matter a cent, except to pile up my embrocation bill."

"Dick! Dick!" Vivian called anxiously. "They are coming on fast. Nawab is now ahead. Can't you get your camel to move?"

Donlin promptly decided to cut out the Arabic flattery. Instead he rattled some pretty muscular blows on the camel's flank. This method seemed to be more effective. The camel heaved her body and plunged forward like a sea craft taking choppy water. She spread her feet, and presently the soft, quick pad-pad-pad falling on the loose soil told Donlin that she was getting up speed. He jerked his head backward, to notice that Nawab was kicking up dust and rubble on rounding the shoulder of rock, with Wildeat and the field closely following. He heard Vivian's voice cheering him on as she put her pony to the gallop alongside the track.

After that—well, his chief business was in clinging to the back of the Bedou racer. Away she headed straight for the winning post. Thenceforward whether she held her lead or gained on it Donlin didn't know. Certainly no horse passed him, and he heard nothing of any clatter of hoofs in the rear. In a little the bunting fluttering over the winning posts drew

near. Before Donlin's entirely fixed gaze rose a crowd of astonished faces. An Afghan shout of triumph smote upon his ear, and for a second he caught a glimpse of Mohammed Khan's exultant face. The next moment he was through the winning posts, and—and going hard for the Baluchistan border!

IN his excitement he had dropped the rope to shut off steam or wind in the camel's nostrils. Fatima paid no heed to his shouts of "Stop, you crazy brute!" As he saw Mother Earth tearing past beneath he thought of dropping off; but at such a pace it was impossible to make sure of escaping a rock.

Consequently there was nothing else for him to do but try and stay on the back of the camel. The beast carried him over a rise, across a barren divide, and plunged headlong down a narrow defile. The red, precipitous rocks on each side reflected the glowing heat, and made Donlin feel as if he was traveling through an oven. Suddenly he heard a wild cry echoing up the defile.

"Ya hak! Ya hak! Ya hak! Ya hak!" Fatima sped round a corner of the defile. Right ahead, just where the path closed in to about a single beast's width, another man on a camel was halted. Perched atop a lean, scrawny beast sat a wild, blazing-eyed, long-haired individual, attired principally in a huge green turban, and flourishing a gun with a barrel about a yard and a half in length. On catching sight of Donlin he brought his gun to aim.

"Get out of the way, you idiot!" shouted Donlin. "Don't you see I can't stop this runaway camel?"

"Ya hak! Ya hak! Ya hak! Ya hak!" came back for answer—also the report of the gun.

A bullet sang above Donlin's head and splattered in the rear from rock to rock of the defile.

The two camels came together in a head-on crash, and Donlin fell into the arms of the wild figure. As Donlin said afterward, it was as tight a place for a scrimmage as might be hoped for by anyone looking for that kind of trouble. While the camels squealed, bit, and strove to kick each other in their rage, Donlin and Ya hak fought after their own fashion. Donlin let drive with his fists, an attention that Ya hak tried to return with the butt of his gun. Finally Donlin found himself on the ground with his hands tightly grasping Ya hak's throat.

"Had enough?" inquired Donlin, giving an extra pinch.

Ya hak groaned what Donlin took for assent.

"All right then," said Donlin. "I'm going to take you back to Hassanbad to find out what you meant by shooting at a peaceful traveler."

He turned Ya hak over on his back, grabbed his turban, and with it bound his arms securely. Then he glanced up, to see that the camels had settled their scrap and were looking on calmly at the last round of the human bout.

A little later a rather curious caravan took the path up the defile. In the lead went Fatima, then Ya hak's camel with Ya hak in leash at its tail, and Donlin marching alongside shouldering Ya hak's gun.

AT Hassanbad a large tent had been prepared to celebrate the day's great event. All Hassanbad and its guests had gathered therein to sit down to a banquet, with Donlin's disappearance still the chief topic of discussion.

Presently a khitmutgar entered and sought the Deputy Commissioner. "Sir," he spoke in a low voice, "outside there is a Sahib. He says he is Donlin Sahib; but Allah alone knows. He has on few clothes, which hang from him like rags, and he is all covered with dust. Donlin Sahib went away with one camel; but this Sahib comes with two, and brings an evil looking man who is condemning your Excellency and all the Sahibs to Gehenna."

Vivian happened to be near her father, and rushed out. When the Deputy Commissioner and the others followed they

found her hanging to the arm of a man who certainly looked most undesirable.

"It's Dick!" she cried jubilantly. "And he's come back, as I knew he would, from Baluchistan!"

"Dick!" repeated the Deputy Commissioner with emphasis. "Dick?" he questioned. His eyes wandered to Donlin's captive, and he started. "Why, that—that is our troublesome friend the Mad Mullah!"

"Mad Mullah!" echoed Donlin. "You

don't tell me! Well, he means a five-thousand-rupee reward, and with two for the Handicap that makes seven. Not a bad day's work!"

By this time the crowd had gathered round Donlin, and a cheer went up. In another moment Donlin's legs were caught from under him, and he was borne shoulder high into the tent.

"I guess," he chuckled, "this ought to put old Hassanbad on the map, and—something else O. K. with the Deputy Commissioner."

Here ends this instalment of Flower of the Gorse

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mae carried in one of his trunks? Is that gone also?"

Mrs. Carmac snapped that she did not mean to trouble the police. The sooner she was out of Pont Aven and free of its oppressive atmosphere the better she would be pleased. Then, apparently ashamed of her petulance, she explained the mystery of the opened lock.

Raymond tried to be helpful. He frowned judicially. "Where did you actually place the jewel case?" he asked.

"In those straps," she said, pointing to the slings attached to the inside of the lid. "Then isn't it at least possible that you did not actually lock the box, though believing you had done so? In this event the case, being heavy, may have fallen out, and be now somewhere in the locality where the box was found."

"No," said Popple. "The diver had his orders. He searched pertic'lar."

Mrs. Carmac rang for Celeste. "Take these articles, and give them to Mademoiselle Julia for distribution among the poor women of the village," she said. Her attitude was eloquent. The pearls were lost irretrievably. She dismissed the subject.

"Mais, Madame," cried the dismayed Celeste, "much of the linen is veritably new, and only requires washing."

"Do as I bid you. I shall never wear any of those garments again. Captain Popple, here is the key you want. I leave you to deal with the customs people. Well, Mr. Raymond, you have just returned from Quimperle, I suppose? Did you have a cold journey?"

RAYMOND took the cue, and said nothing more of the theft. When Popple and the maid had gone he explained that during the run to Quimperle he decided that it would be more discreet to telephone Duquesne than send Yvonne's telegram. He was lucky in reaching his friend without delay, and was thus able to give him detailed instructions, including a full description of Madeleine's appearance. Duquesne had promised to meet the train at the Gare Saint Lazare. In fact, he was so eager to serve that, failing Madeleine's arrival at the expected hour, he would meet the next train, and the next. In any case he would telegraph the result early in the morning.

Yvonne was more than ever grateful. Mrs. Carmac was tired, almost peevish; so the girl did not remain much longer.

She agreed readily when Raymond asked to be permitted to see her home, and did not demur on reaching the bridge at an unexpected request that she should walk with him a little way down the road.

"The hour is not so late," he said deferentially, "and I wish to lay before you a very serious matter. I may surprise you greatly. I may even distress you. But I do want you to believe, Miss Yvonne, that in baring my heart to you I am not swayed by unworthy motives."

The girl was certainly astonished by this portentous opening; but the secretary's action with regard to Madeleine had completely dissipated a sense of restraint and dislike that she was usually aware of when in his company. Thinking he had some news from Paris that he did not wish to reveal in Mrs. Carmac's presence, she hastened to assure him that

he might speak with the utmost candor.

"That is good and kind of you," he said; "but it is only what I expected to hear from your lips. But I am sure you will forgive me if I tread warily. I have that to tell which may find you unprepared, and I think you will thank me afterward—no matter what view you take of what I may call an astounding revelation—if I do not blurt out what I have to say like some frightened child. My nature is a cautious one, and I shrink from even the semblance of inflicting pain. Such characteristics may be commendable in their way; but they have their drawbacks in a case like this, when a man who would willingly undergo any suffering for your sake is forced, against the grain, to utter unpleasant truths."

YVONNE was more and more bewildered. She realized intuitively now that he meant to discuss her mother's affairs; so she strove to make him comprehend that he was treading on dangerous ground.

"If you are referring, even indirectly, to Mrs. Carmac," she said frankly, "I must warn you instantly that I cannot listen to anything concerning her. Until she came to Pont Aven I was not even aware that such a relative as an aunt existed. When she leaves this place—though I shall see her often, I hope, in the future—the relations between us will be rather those of good friends than of aunt and niece. You ought to understand, then, Mr. Raymond, that if your confidences deal with her I refuse to hear them."

Raymond sighed heavily. He seemed to be at a loss for words. In reality Yvonne had said exactly what he anticipated, and he counted on a well judged delay as calculated to increase her agitation and weaken her defenses.

"Please don't render an ungracious task harder," he said, as though nerving himself to a supreme effort, when Yvonne, after walking a few paces in silence, was about to tell him that she would go no farther. "I meant to prepare you by some vague comments that would clear the air. But your highly strung and generous temperament will not permit any display of what I have described as my methods of caution. Well, then, if it must be so, let us get to the crux of the matter at once."

"Mrs. Carmac is not your aunt, Miss Yvonne. She is your mother! She was your father's lawful wife! She deserted him and you, got an American divorce, and was married to Walter Carmac in England. I believe that the second marriage was not a valid one. It is terrible to have to say these things; but they are true, and it rests with you to save her from exposure and ignominy. I beseech you to credit my good faith in this matter. To whom can I appeal if not to you, her daughter? It is manifestly impossible that I should go to your father. He could not help if he would. Her future happiness, her very means of existence, are in your hands."

"Can you then reproach me if I ask you to bear with me while I endeavor to show a way out of a situation bristling with difficulties for all of us, alive with real danger for your own mother?"

To be continued next Sunday

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